How To Talk WITH Kids about Race & Racism

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Development of Racial Identity by Age

Guiding Assumptions:

- The development of a positive sense of racial/ethnic identity, not based on assumed superiority or inferiority, is an important task for everyone.
- Racial / ethnic identity formation is a developmental process which unfolds in rather predictable ways.
- For young people of color, the process often begins to unfold in early childhood years, around 3 years old.
- For whites living in racial diverse areas, the process often begins to unfold during older elementary years, around 10 years old.
- For whites living in predominantly white areas, the process may not begin until leaving their monoculture community, for many college age.
- Many white adults have given little consideration to the meaning of their own racial group membership.
- The fact that adolescents of color and white youth, as well as white educators, are on very different developmental timelines in terms of racial identity development is a potential source of misunderstanding and conflict.
- Those who feel affirmed in their own identity are more likely to be respectful of others' self-definition.

Prevailing Majority Culture Ideology:

The prevailing majority culture ideology promotes the idea that children are color-blind, i.e., they are unaware of race and racism. This ideology further assumes that if adults don't talk with children about "it," children will grow up to be non-prejudiced adults. Denial and avoidance, then, appear to be the main techniques for dealing with one of the most pervasive and crucial problems of U.S. society.

Children will "naturally" grow up to be non-racist adults only when they live in a non-racist society. Until then, adults must guide children's anti-racist development. This will include the fostering of: 1) accurate knowledge and pride about one's racial/cultural identity; 2) accurate knowledge and appreciation of other racial groups; and 3) an understanding of how racism works and how to combat it.

For Children from oppressed racial/cultural groups, the order of concern seems to be: 1) questions about one's own identity; questions about racism and about whites; and 2) questions about other groups. For white children, the order seems to be: 1) questions about people of color; 2) comments which reflect stereotypic or negative attitudes; 3) questions about their own racial/cultural identity.

Ages 2-3

Children are becoming more curious and aware of how they look and how they differ from other people. Differences between girls and boys, hair color and eye color become topics of conversation. Children will begin to talk about their own physical appearance and abilities. This age may also see children beginning to notice that children who look different may also be eating different foods or speaking a different language.

Children at this age may also begin to show signs of pre-prejudices (the ideas and feelings in very young children that may later develop into real prejudices when reinforced by biases that exist in society). Examples of this may be seen in children who will only play with dolls who look like themselves or show fear around people who look different than them.

Things you may hear at this stage:

"I have brown hair."

"I have blue eyes."

Ages 3-6

Children in this age range will think of race in strictly in terms of physical appearance. Children are aware of both their own and other's physical attributes and have questions about why they look the way they do and why other people look differently. It is common for this age to have questions about "social colors" and "general colors." You may also see children in this stage question the permanency of skin color or eye color. You may also see children in this age group begin to identify with their own ethnic group as they become more aware of family traditions and history.

Things you may hear at this stage:

"Will my skin color change when I grow up?"

"Will you always be white?"

"I'm not black. I'm brown."

"I'm about as brown as this crayon."

"Your nose is different because it goes up."

"Why am I white?"

Ages 6-10

Children at this stage have a literal understanding of ethnicity; that ancestry influences not only how people look but also the food they eat, the language they speak and the activities they enjoy. For example, being Mexican-American means speaking Spanish and eating Mexican food.

This age will also show a greater interest in cultural characteristics and tend to be working on the conflict between belonging to different groups. For example, they will grapple with being both "American" and "black." These children are also increasingly peer oriented and are developing a sense of "fairness" through their games and play.

Awareness of racism against their group is often heightened during this age and personal prejudice can become apparent in behavior and attitude. It is so important that children during this stage are made aware that racism is not a natural part of human nature and that it is not inevitable.

Things you might hear at this stage:

White children expressing gratitude that they are not Latino.

A white child expressing the belief that slaves were bad because they fought and a black child countering that they were fighting to be free.

“He can’t be Mexican, he speaks English.”

Ages 10 – 14

At this stage children begin to understand the social implications related to race. Studies show that sixth-graders can grasp how political resources are allocated in neighborhoods and how affirmative action affects minorities. Also, inter-racial friendships that were formed in elementary school tend to fall apart as children begin to socially segregate.

The historical and geographic aspects of racial identity are more deeply understood, as is the concept of “ancestry.” Feelings and knowledge about cultural values and personal struggles against racism become more complex.

Things you might hear at this stage:

“That’s the rich part of town. Only whites can live there.”

“My Grandmother came her from Africa. She tells me a lot of stories about what life was like there.”

Adolescence:

Self-Identity: refers to how we define ourselves. Self-identity forms the basis of our self-esteem. In adolescence, the way we see ourselves changes in response to peers, family and school, among other social environments. Our self-identities shape our perceptions of belonging. Many teen-agers express pride in their heritage and a sense of belonging to a group as their view of ethnicity and race matures.

Social-Identity: Is constructed by others, and may differ from self-identity. Typically, people categorize individuals according to broad, socially-defined labels. For example, if you have dark skin, you may be labeled “black” by others even though you may not have adopted that identity for yourself.

Identity is dynamic and complex, and changes over time.

Above section: Derman-Sparks, L., Tanaka Higa, C., & Sparks, B. (1980). Children, race, and racism: How race awareness develops

Talking WITH Kids About Race & Racism

All Ages:

Examine your own biases.

Look at the examples that you set for the children in your life. Even the smallest actions can sometimes send negative signals to a child.

Things to think about:

- When in public, do you tend to sit only near people of your own race?
- If someone tells an ethnic joke, do you smile even if it makes you uncomfortable?
- Do you look for opportunities to expand the racial mix of you own group of friends and acquaintances?

An Honest Conversation

Answering a child's questions honestly and without embarrassment, and sharing multicultural books with them, is the first step toward teaching tolerance. Here are a few basic principles.

Don't deny differences.

"If a white child asks, 'Why does that kid have brown skin and I have light skin?' don't say, 'There's really no difference.' Kids aren't color-blind, and they won't believe you," Dr. Katz says. "They're just trying to find out whether these differences mean anything." Instead, you could simply respond, "Because his mommy and daddy have brown skin" or "Skin color is passed down from parents and grandparents, and people are different colors depending on which part of the world their ancestors came from." You should also tell children that people think and feel and enjoy a lot of the same things, even if they look different.

Give straight answers.

Never make a child feel ashamed for bringing up racial issues or pointing out differences in skin color. By responding to kids' questions and comments in a matter-of-fact fashion, adult allies can pave the way for future candid conversations about race. For example, if a child points to a black woman and says, "Look, that lady's face is brown," don't be embarrassed and hush the child up -- take the opportunity to educate the child and explain why.

"There's no need to bring in race if the child is just talking about [the color of] a person's skin," Dr. Wright says. "Adults think race, but children just think eyes or skin or whatever other characteristic. Keep your answers specific but truthful." Tailor your explanations to your students' questions to her or his particular age and comprehension level.

Be reassuring.
Sometimes children simply need to hear that it's okay to be different, especially if they are in the minority.

Don't overdo it.
Maintaining a balance is important, says Dr. Wright, especially if you're a minority. Minority parents or teachers who dwell too much on race, particularly with very young children who can't yet process the information, may be doing them a disservice. For example, Dr. Wright says, she knows black parents who tell their children that they'll have to work twice as hard as white students do to succeed in school. "Some of them grow up thinking that they are destined to be treated unfairly and don't even bother trying," she says. "It handicaps a child, it really does."

Dealing With Prejudice
Despite our best efforts, we can't protect children from the reality of prejudice and bigotry. Nor can we shield them from the stereotypes that are so prevalent in our society. Rachelle Ashour, a Virginia grammar-school teacher, recalls one eye-opening experience she had while teaching a predominantly black third- and fourth-grade class in Washington, D.C. "If you go into the gift shop of a museum with the kids, for instance, they really are watched more than other children are -- it used to make me so angry," she says. "And the kids would pick up on it. They'd say, 'They're following me in the store because they think I'm going to steal something.' I'd say, 'They're just prejudiced.'" By acknowledging the racism, Ashour says, it gave her the opportunity to discuss with her students ways in which they might handle such situations.

Unfortunately, many families find themselves living in communities in which their kids are surrounded only by people who look just like them. "Young kids begin to develop attitudes toward people who are different from them very early on if they're not exposed to people from other environments and cultures," says Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D., a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and coauthor of *Raising Black Children* (Plume, 1992). Experts say they can easily develop an "us-them" mentality. Here's what you can do to help.

Expose kids to various cultures.
Dr. Poussaint says it is especially important for teachers to expose their kids to other cultures through multicultural books, by attending shows or movies featuring musicians or actors of different races, and by providing toys and dolls that reflect the world's diversity. "When kids have dolls that aren't all black or all white, they begin to see that people come in different shades of color, with different shapes of eyes," Dr. Poussaint says. "This might encourage children to ask questions. Later, if they hear derogatory terms, they'll know it's not the right way to refer to people."

Skills Building – Approaches in answering questions or having conversations

Approaches to common questions/conversations about race

Inquiring / Questioning (All Ages)

This approach is unpacking what children are thinking or feeling.

“That’s a good comment. What makes you say that? This is something that I’m interested in talking about with you.”

“What did you think about the part of the movie when ____? (Follow-up from adult) I ask because when I watched it I felt ____ because of _____. What do you think?

Common Preschooler Questions

"What color am I?" Use a nice, big paint kit to explore colors with your preschooler and find the shade that most closely matches his skin tone. Since your child isn't asking about race, it's fine to give an answer like brown, cream or tan. Expect that your preschooler might wrongly identify his own skin tone and that of others, or that the shade he picks might change over time.

"Mummy, are you black/white?" Find out why he's asking (possibly he heard someone else referring to you by your color) before responding with a simple yes or no. Remind your child that everyone's different and that's a good thing.

"Why is that girl brown?" A good general answer for this age group is simply: "Everyone's skin is different". “Race is one of the beautiful things that makes us different, but I know that the color of our skin does not mean someone is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ or ‘nice’ or ‘mean.” Whatever the context, the key is to embrace diversity with your tone and words.

"Why doesn't her mommy/daddy look like her?" Tell your child that not all mommies/daddies and children look alike but that they're still a family. Point out any examples in your own family, like the fact that you have blonde hair while your preschooler's is dark.

Using Empathetic to Connect (Early Childhood & School-age)

Invite the child/youth to imagine how they would feel if I similar (negative) statement were applied to them.

An adult might respond to a comment or joke by saying, “Wow, when you say that, I can’t help but imagine what they would feel if they hear that. Can you imagine what it would feel like if other kids were sitting around talking about us like that?”

Educating (School-age +)

This approach asks us to make use of the knowledge that we gain and try to inform the children in our lives what we know.

Instead of saying, “We’re all equal.”

Try saying, “We’re all equal here. But sometimes in the world, people are treated differently based on the color of their skin. What are things we can do to make sure that doesn’t happen in our home/classroom?”

Returning Later/Learning Together (All Ages)

This approach is teaching the child to navigate resources to understand the world in which they live. When your child asks a tough question about race: Instead of saying nothing and avoiding the conversation or “I don’t have all the answers” try saying: “That is something adults haven’t even figured out. Let’s learn about it together.”

Real talk and facts (Pre-teens & Teens)

The first step in “real talk and facts” approach that starts with listening to the teen. This means giving the youth a chance to talk through what’s going on, without the adult-ally trying to fix the situation. Often, youth aren’t expecting you to fix things – they just want to be listened to.

Supporting other adult allies:

“My child said something racist, therefore I must be a bad parent.” Racism is a powerful system that affects individuals and institutions. Children are steeped in this culture from birth and it should come as no surprise when they ask a question or make a comment about race that gives us pause. Many adults get caught up in feeling guilty

for things that child in their life has said, rather than seizing the opportunity to have a deeper conversation that examines the source of the comment. This guilt also prevents them from seeking out the support of peers who can bring expertise and insights to the situation.

Here's something you can try with other adult allies:
Instead of saying, "My child said something so horrible I can't even repeat it."

Try saying, "I think my child is beginning to notice inequalities in society. They said _____. Has your child ever said anything like this? What did you do about it?"

Engaging in Racial Conversations with People Close to Us – Other Adult Allies

- Begin slowly. Try not to speak out on every new piece of knowledge at once if they are not asking for more. These are our closest relationships, and we have plenty of time to facilitate a different world view for our loved ones. Jumping in too quickly might only push them away.

- Speak from the heart. Refer to recently acquired information and how it has been personally affecting you. Ask only for them to listen and to try to understand why we feel as we do.

- Demonstrate excitement. If we offer some of our new realizations with excitement and interest, we stand a better chance of getting people on board. A sudden shift into anger will likely be alienating and make our journey less appealing.

- Challenge sensitively. Using the previously described strategy of expressing our emotional reaction ("Approaches for Confronting Racism") can be extremely helpful when we need to challenge something that has been said.

- Be humble. Becoming angry with our families and close friends for not seeing issues of race as we do is a sure way to get shut down and turn them off.

- Pick battles carefully. Some people will just not be ready to hear what we have to say. Reserve energy for moments when our efforts can make a difference. Retreat and come back in a different day, or a different year, depending on the individual.

- Plant seeds. Know that we plant seeds every time we actively address racism. We might not see immediate results, but some new epiphany may be growing in someone that will someday emerge, even if we never see the tangible results.

- Extend the invitation. Invite family and friends to join this journey with you. Give a book on racism or white privilege as a present to someone. Ask someone to watch a movie with you with a diverse cast. Invite someone to attend a culturally/racially diverse art show, musical performance, or other event with you. Ask questions and prompt conversation to see what friends and family are thinking.

My Notes

Seven Ways to Explore Race in the Classroom

by Jerry Michel

1. **Facing Our Reluctance to Discuss Race**

   Think back to a fond memory of one of your teachers. When you remember her or him, do you sense that your teacher was as actively involved in learning as she or he wanted you to be? This is the first step to engaging others in learning: we must be actively and visibly engaged in our own learning.

   Discussing race is often uncomfortable for adults, especially in a racially mixed setting. Whether it is fear of being insensitive, a lack of understanding or experience, or general avoidance, meaningful discussions concerning race are often hard to come by, especially in the classroom.

   Before starting discussions about race with your students, examine your own experiences with race as a child, student, teacher, and adult. If you are white, consider Jeane Copenhaver-Johnson's (2006) observation that race "is not on the radar of many white parents and teachers because whiteness is so rarely scrutinized. That is, those who live with daily privilege often find difficulty recognizing and acknowledging its presence in their daily lives."

   As adults and teachers, we have to be honest with ourselves before we can have honest discussions with others, especially students. Are you willing to make your own struggles and discomfort accessible to your students? When you are unfamiliar with or unaware of the characteristics, traditions, and practices of a culture or an ethnic group, how do you go about understanding your students' approaches to learning? Examining how your personal beliefs influence your teaching is a powerful tool in combating the tendency to "rely on our own personal experiences to make sense of students' lives—an unreflective habit that often results in misinterpretations of those students' experiences and leads to miscommunication." (Villegas and Lucas, 2007)

2. **Sometimes It Isn't What We Say, It's What We Don't Say.**

   When speaking about race to children, parents and teachers often avoid potential discomfort by reducing the situation to a nonissue or changing the topic. We downplay our differences by seeking out similarities that, on a simple semantic surface, seem to be perfectly reasonable. The aphorism "we're all the same on the inside" will be familiar to anyone who has spent time in a primary classroom.

   While this observation makes it easier for members of the majority, glossing over others' unique cultural and racial characteristics does little to recognize the contributions members of minority groups make to our society. Race is a social and cultural construct, not a biological predetermination. The experiences we have growing up in any culture indelibly and distinctly make us who we are. If we do not discuss our differences and what makes each culture unique, our silence implies, at best, a lack of awareness or genuine interest. At worst, silence implies a lack of respect.

   How would your own learning progress if the lessons you worked on in class and the book for children you read from never represented your family's culture or heritage? If your culture were consistently ignored, how would it affect your learning? Your motivation? Your confidence?

3. **Let Children Lead the Way. . . .**

   Do not underestimate students' capacity to discuss race. Students are often more comfortable discussing ethnicity and identity than adults, mainly because students are likely to have friendships and relationships with classmates whose backgrounds reflect a wider range of race and national origin. In the classroom, our job as educators is to provide safe parameters and structures that encourage mutual respect and honest exploration of issues.

Although children may not have the vocabulary to identify the sources and effects of racial tension, they are nonetheless highly aware of the stereotypes present in our society. By providing a supportive setting for students to address issues of race, we acknowledge the obstacles children of color may be facing alone or only with the support of family.

Isabella, a fifth grader, faces challenges that are all too familiar today. She remembered being one of the best readers in her class as a kindergartner in Colombia. While others were just learning to read, she was reading "big, thick chapter books." In the United States, however, reading was a different story for Isabella. Although she successfully completed a program for English-language learners, questions about her reading comprehension lingered year after year. By the time she reached fifth grade, she had repeated a remedial-reading program three times. She no longer read the big, thick chapter books, not even at home. Her early successes were not part of the picture anymore; sadly, they were never in the picture. Her teachers did not know.

"Even my stepfather would give me these baby books at home to read to everybody," she lamented. "He'd have me read them aloud and say how great I was doing, but I knew they were baby books. Eventually, I just believed everyone that I wasn't a good reader."

The fact that the remedial-reading program Isabella repeated three times was really designed to be a one-year intervention certainly didn't help. The cycle of low expectations continued for Isabella until teachers took the time to learn more about her background experiences. Recalling her strengths as a kindergartner helped boost Isabella's confidence so that she eventually made great gains over the course of a single school year.

Personal engagement with our students and their cultures will help us find ways to meaningfully connect their background experiences to their classroom lessons. One way to open the door to conversations about race and culture is to plan interactive read-alouds. Finding titles that reflect the diversity of our neighborhoods and nation is the first step. Being aware of students' family histories, cultural backgrounds and strengths, and the concerns immigrant and minority families have about American schools can help prepare teachers for uncharted and sometimes uncomfortable territory.

When locating and reading selections, focus on:

- finding high-quality fiction and nonfiction that is compelling, pertinent, and engaging. Don't bring in inauthentic texts merely to fill a quota or requirement.
- encouraging students to respond to passages as you read. Students are more likely to give genuine reactions and ask questions while listening to a provocative read-aloud selection.
- reading and reflecting on reading selections in advance of classroom sessions, preferably with colleagues and friends.
- sharing the book with parents or community members whose culture is represented in the book if you have concerns about students' questions and comments that the reading might evoke. Does the book portray their culture accurately, sensitively, and informatively? How would members of the group portrayed answer the questions you anticipate?
- in older grades, letting students preview the reading selection. Give them a day or two to develop and submit their initial reactions. This input will help you prepare responses to potential questions or comments in advance.

4. **Listen Before You Leap.**
   Our definitions of race are rooted in the sum total of our experiences. Our personal, familial, and cultural memories shape our opinions about our own cultural group. Citing data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, Gary Howard (2007) notes that "ninety percent of U.S. public school teachers are white; most

grew up and attended school in middle-class, English-speaking, predominantly white communities and received their teacher preparation in predominantly white colleges and universities." When working with students whose heritage differs from their own, educators often lack the understanding and strategies that would help them incorporate students' background experiences, belief structures, and cultural traditions into lessons, activities, and curricula.

Students are quick to recognize adults' lack of awareness. Keri, an eighth grader with a multiethnic set of friends, laughs when she talks about the reactions teachers have when they overhear students' hallway banter in school. "I don't know about you," she explains, "but in the group of friends that I hang out with, a lot of our 'inside' jokes are misunderstood."

To an adult, these inside jokes about race, culture, and faith are often offensive; and our first reaction is nearly always one of discomfort. Educators who are able to corral their initial disapproval can create a powerful learning opportunity. Teachers who take the time to understand the context and intent behind what students say are better able to engage in meaningful conversations with their students.

Keri continues, "People often come to conclusions about my group of friends 'harming' me, most likely because of how sensitive our society is with talking about race. My friends and I are somewhat comfortable talking about race, so as a result, staff and other students sometimes stop and stare. They are shocked by what they hear only because they jump to conclusions. We are all guilty of being defensive when the subject of race comes up, but why is that?"

In school, just as in society, students often define who they are by the groups to which they belong. Membership in a group can covey pride and security, both of which are difficult to relinquish. When schools are governed by a dominant culture, fitting in and "finding all the ways that we are alike" can potentially diminish the contributions a diverse student body can bring to classroom lessons.

Students growing up today have many experiences in a multiethnic and multiracial society, from more inclusive media and advertising to the changing demographics of our schools and neighborhoods. In television, multicultural books, all sorts of media, images featuring the faces and feelings of many cultures are becoming more commonplace. Students accept this as the norm; anything less would be inauthentic. We need to provide them with the encouragement and faith that they will be the ones to champion causes that will make our society more accepting of the diversity of cultures that make up our individual communities, countries, and world.

Classroom conversations and activities that build a climate of acceptance should:

- focus on listening to students' ideas and the reasons behind them.
- emphasize that it is the responsibility of both majority and minority groups to address issues of race.
- allow adequate time for students to process questions before giving responses. Teachers typically do not wait more than a second or two when calling on students; extending the "wait time" between question and answer encourages more thoughtful responses and communicates respect for ideas. Do not cut students short when their first responses do not seem to make sense; that which is initially unclear may end up being insightful.
- express confidence in students' abilities to provide leadership and solutions to the struggle against racism, especially when adults' efforts stall.

5. **Confront Stereotyping When It Occurs.**
In any school hallway or playground, it doesn't take long before you hear the influence of stereotypes in name-calling, taunting, and hallway banter. Muslim students are called terrorists. Speech patterns of minority groups are exaggerated or mocked. African American and Latino youth are associated with gangs and gang culture, even in

communities in which gangs are not prevalent. Stereotyping in this way is hurtful and discriminatory, yet students may not have the experience or resources to understand fully the impact of the words they are using and hearing.

When students' conversations or language reflect racist stereotypes, listen first for intent. Are they friends, enemies, or "frenemies"? Don't assume that younger students know the emotional weight behind the words they use. Ask them:

- to explain the words or term they chose to use.
- what the words mean to them.
- what they think the words mean to others.
- why they chose to use the words they did.

There are two reasons for asking these questions. First, students' answers give teachers and parents a more complete picture of a child's understanding of the situation. Second, the question-and-answer period provides time for the situation to de-escalate. It is important to consider the power of social momentum in school groups; ideas can take hold quickly, and students will repeat language and behavior without pausing to reflect on the meaning or influence their actions carry. Since racial intolerance, bias, and stereotyping are learned behaviors, the time we spend providing students with thoughtful alternatives is crucial. Students need the time and tools to evaluate the consequences of their actions, both for themselves and others.

It isn't enough simply to discuss stereotyping. By being honest, direct, and forthcoming, we can use these teachable moments to help students unlearn the negative behaviors they have developed. When students can identify why their actions are troubling to others (rather than identify their actions as something that gets them into trouble), they are ready to take the first steps toward having honest discussions about race.

6. **Don't Wait for Heritage Days and History Months.**
Growing up, much of our exposure to racial and ethnic groups other than our own is through the food featured at cultural celebrations. In planning curriculum and school events, it is important to understand that by waiting for a special day, month, or celebration to discuss and explore issues of race, we silently assert the dominance of the majority culture. Copenhaver-Johnson (2006) astutely crystallizes researchers' findings that "white teachers tend to view progressive curricular choices as culture-free." In other words, we can't embrace diversity while homogenizing the lessons we write and the materials we use.

   As many African American educators, researchers, and students point out, if February is Black History Month, what does that make the other eleven months?

   Promoting a more inclusive classroom climate can begin with a more diverse classroom library. Look beyond books about the Holocaust, escapes from slavery, and crossing a border. Look for books that celebrate everyday life, where the story is central to young readers' enjoyment and understanding. Look for books for children that celebrate relatively unknown heroes of all backgrounds. When the titles we select for the library reflect the broader communities we serve, we provide more than literacy development; we honor our students' families and cultures.

7. **Embrace the Long Haul: Actions, Not Words, Lead to Change.**
Children and young adults have always been impatient. Cell phones, laptop computers, and other media tools make our access to information portable and almost instantaneous. Most people today cannot imagine taking a trip without using online mapping, a GPS device, or a smart-phone application that directs them turn by turn from origin point to destination. Having instant access to information may make us feel as if we are more aware, but some understandings can only be uncovered through long journeys and self-discovery. Each generation has greater access to the knowledge from previous generations; each generation discovers that it takes time to develop the wisdom to use this knowledge well.

   Taking a good idea from inception to reality can seem to take an eternity. The institutions that perpetuate racism, both knowingly and unwittingly, have been in place for a long time. Classroom conversations and literacy

instruction are important tools for combating racism, but it is our actions as students, teachers, and community leaders that will make the difference. Do not judge your success by the effectiveness of a single lesson. Judge your success by the slow and steady change you make over the course of years. Each year ask yourself, "What can I do better? How can I better help students move from conversations about tolerance to actions that promote acceptance?" The influence we can have as individuals is enhanced by our ability to interact meaningfully with communities around the world. Don't wait for a pen pal project or an exchange activity to start thinking about what it means to be a participant in the global community. Start sharing articles, news, and stories from around the world with students as part of your regular read-aloud time or when you discuss current events. Always be on the lookout for opportunities to make connections between the books you read, themes you explore, and what is happening in the world around us.

Beyond Tolerance: Expecting Acceptance

No matter how dedicated and persistent we are, helping students, classes, schools, and districts face individual and institutional racism is not a job we can do alone or without the input of others. The following resources provide additional in-depth discussion, specific ideas and lessons to pursue, solid research on immigrants' experiences entering American schools, and links to online resources. Use them to generate faculty discussions, remembering that educating others begins with educating ourselves. Advocate change, promote hope, and focus on changing one heart and mind at a time.

10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books

For Racism and Sexism

Both in school and out of school, young children are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes – expressed repeatedly in books and other media – gradually distort children's perceptions until stereotypes and myths about minorities and women are accepted as reality. It is difficult for librarians or teachers to convince children to question society's attitudes; but if children can learn to detect racism and sexism in books, they can transfer that skill to other areas. The following ten guidelines can be used by teachers, librarians, and other educators to evaluate children's books and to help students detect racism and sexism in the books they read.

1. Check the Illustrations

- *Look for stereotypes*. A stereotype, which usually has derogatory implications, is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, or sex. Some infamous (overt) stereotypes of blacks are the happy-go-lucky, watermelon-eating Sambo and the fat, eye-rolling "mammy;" of Chicanos, the sombrero-wearing peon or fiesta-loving, macho bandito; of Asian Americans, the inscrutable, slant-eyed oriental; of American Indians, the naked savage or primitive brave and his squaw; of Puerto Ricans, the switchblade-toting teenage gang member; and of women, the domesticated mother, the demure little girl, or the wicked stepmother. While you may not always find stereotypes in the blatant forms described, look for descriptions, depictions, or labels that tend to demean, stereotype, or patronize characters because of their race or sex.
- *Look for tokenism.* If racial minority characters appear in the illustrations, do they look like white people except for being tinted or colored? Do all minorities look stereotypically alike, or are they depicted as individuals with distinctive features?
- *Look for active doers*. Do the illustrations depict minorities in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Are males the active doers and females the inactive observers?

2. Check the Story Line

Publishers are making an effort not to include adverse reflections or inappropriate portrayals of minority characters in stories; however, racist and sexist attitudes still find expression in less obvious ways. Examples of some subtle (covert) forms of bias include the following:

- *Standard for success:* Does it take "white" behavior standards for a minority person to "get ahead?" Is "making it" in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal? To gain acceptance and approval, do persons of color have to exhibit extraordinary qualities, excel in sports, get A's, and so forth? In friendships between white and nonwhite children, is it the child of color who does most of the understanding and forgiving?

- *Resolution of problems:* How are problems presented, conceived, and resolved? Are minority people considered to be "the problem?" Are the oppressions faced by minorities and women represented as related to social injustice? Are the reasons for poverty and oppressions explained, or are poverty and oppression accepted as inevitable? Does the story line encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? Is a particular problem faced by a racial minority person or a female resolved through the benevolent intervention of a white person or a male?

- *Role of women:* Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or are their achievements due to their good looks or relationships with boys? Are sex roles incidental or critical to characterization and plot? Could the same story be told if the sex roles were reversed?

3. Look at the Life-Styles

Are minority persons and their settings depicted in ways that contrast unfavorably with the unstated norm of white middle-class suburbia? If the minority group in question is depicted as "different," are negative value judgments implied? Are minorities depicted exclusively in ghettos, barrios, or migrant camps? If the illustrations and text depict other cultures, do they go beyond oversimplifications and offer genuine insights into other life-styles? Look for inaccuracies and inappropriateness in the depictions of other cultures. Watch for instances of the "quaint-natives-in costume" syndrome, which is noticeable in areas such as clothing, customs, behaviors, and personality traits.

4. Weigh the Relationships Among People

Do white people in the story possess the power, take the leadership, and make the important decisions? Do racial minorities and females of all races primarily function in supporting roles?

How are family relationships depicted? In black families is the mother always dominant? In Hispanic families are there always many children? If the family is separated, are social conditions – unemployment and poverty, for example – cited as reasons for the separation?

Are both sexes portrayed in nurturing roles with their families?

5. Note the Heroes

For many years books showed only "safe" minority heroes – those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment. Today, minority groups insist on the right to define their own heroes (of both sexes) based on their own concepts and struggle for justice.

When minority heroes do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous or because what they have done has benefited white people? Ask this question: "Whose interest is a particular hero serving?"

6. Consider the Effects on a Child's Self-Image

Are norms established that limit any child's aspiration and self-concept? What effect can it have on black children to be continually bombarded with images of the color white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, and virtue and the color black as evil, dirty, and menacing? Does the book counteract or reinforce this positive association with the color white and negative association with the color black?

What happens to a girl's self-image when she reads that boys perform all brave and important deeds? What is the effect on a girl's self-esteem if she is not fair of skin and slim of body?

In a particular story is there one or more persons with whom a minority child can readily and positively identify?

7. Check Out the Author's Perspective

No author can be entirely objective. All authors write from a cultural as well as personal context. In the past, children's books were written by members of the middle class. Consequently, a single ethnocentric perspective has dominated children's literature in the United States. Read carefully any book in question to determine whether the author's perspective substantially weakens or strengthens the value of his or her written work. Is the perspective patriarchal or feminist? Is it solely Eurocentric, or are minority cultural perspectives respected?

8. Watch for Loaded Words

A word is "loaded" when it has insulting over-tones. Examples of local adjectives (usually racist) are savage, primitive, conniving, lazy, superstitious, treacherous, wily, crafty, inscrutable, docile, and backward.

Look for sexist language and adjectives that exclude or ridicule women. Look for use of the male pronoun to refer to both males and females. While the generic use of the word man was accepted in the past, its use today is outmoded. The following examples illustrate how sexist language can be avoided: substitute the word ancestors for forefathers; chairperson for chairman; community for brotherhood; firefighters for firemen; manufactured for manmade, and the human family for the family of man.

9. Look at the Copyright Date

With rare exceptions nonsexist books were not published before 1973. However, in the early 1970s children's books began to reflect the realities of a multiracial society. This new direction resulted from the emergence of minority authors who wrote about their own experiences. Unfortunately, this trend was reversed in the late 1970s, and publishers cut back on such books.

Therefore, although the copyright date can be a clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly racist or sexist, a recent copyright date is no guarantee of a book's relevance or sensitivity. The copyright date indicates only the year the book was published. It usually takes about two years from the time a

manuscript is submitted to the publisher to the time it is printed. This time lag meant little in the past; but today, publishers attempt to publish relevant children's books, and this time lag is significant.

10. Consider Literacy, Historical, and Cultural Perspectives

Classical or contemporary literature, including folktales and stories having a particular historical or cultural perspective, should be judged in the context of high-quality literary works. In many cases it may be inappropriate to evaluate classical or contemporary literature according to the guidelines contained in this brochure. However, when analyzing such literary works, remember that although a particular attitude toward women or a minority group was prevalent during a certain period in history, that attitude is in the process of changing.

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